

himself around my neck. Detbar howled, unable to close his mouth, his tongue spiked to my collar. I heard Spanic, beside me, click the safety on his gun; I turned and smashed his nose, then took his gun away. He stumbled back against the wall, his hands over his face.

Suit let go of Detbar's tongue, and Detbar fell away to the floor, blood leaking down his chin, wet breast-prints on the front of his jumpsuit.

"It's essential to be able to tell your friends from your enemies," I said. "You guys should be mixing me up a shaker of Bloody Marys right now, and I should be in the shower. There'll be plenty of time for hijinks, ambushes and the like when the Assassin shows up. Which, according to Suit, isn't for another hour or so. So relax. I mean, really." I raised Spanic's gun. "Where's Yp?"

Detbar wasn't talking, and I didn't blame him. Blood was seeping from between his lips. He straightened out his glasses and, hands cupping his chin, slipped back out of the tiny bathroom.

"Mitchell didn't want to help," said Spanic in a defeated voice. "He trusted you." Suddenly, inexplicably, he began weeping.

I hadn't hit him that hard. "What?" I said.

"I think he's in love with you," moaned Spanic.

I didn't know what to say to that, so I just stared. Spanic suddenly got control of himself, hurriedly rearranging his features and sniffing back his tears. He stepped up and plucked away his gun. "For God's sake," he said. "Put something on."

Then he turned and left the room.

I went into the bedroom, put Suit back on, and went out into the corridor. Nobody visible, but I heard water running. When I turned the corner I found Detbar washing out his mouth in a lab sink. He looked up at me fearfully.

"It'll heal. Get that bandaged and then let's have a powwow, okay?"

He nodded solemnly, and a stream of pink saliva rolled out of the corner of his mouth.

I went and found Yp and Spanic. They were in one of the ramshackle bedrooms, lying on the bed in each other's arms. "'Scuse me," I said.

"Eddy wants to say he's sorry," said Yp gravely, sitting up.

"Hey, no sweat. Meet me in the kitchen in a minute; we're gonna shoot the shit."

"Oh, we'll come now," said Yp, quickly disentangling himself from Spanic, who looked sulky.

The two men trotted after me to the kitchen. Detbar joined us a minute later. The three of them took positions as far from one another in the tiny space as they could manage, and nobody except Yp seemed willing to meet my eye.

"Okay," I said. "Where's that Godball?"

"We ateth ith," said Detbar, who had a length of cotton gauze wrapped around his tongue.

"Ate it," I repeated stupidly.

"Yes," giggled Spanic, suddenly giddy. "That's right. We fried it in butter and salt, uh, and we divided it in three parts and ate it. We didn't save you any, either."

There was a long silence. Spanic stood grinning at me. Yp cast his eyes down shyly, and Detbar went and started fumbling in the refrigerator. "Thomething to drink," he said, breaking the seal on a bottle of juice. "Yeth," he said, "when the methage came that an Athathin had been thenth – shit!" He spat the cotton wad onto the floor and took a gulp of juice. "God that stings!"

He turned to face me but still wouldn't meet my eye. "When the Godball heard the Assassin was coming, he suggested we eat him – the Godball, I mean. The Assassin is like a bee-sting, you know. It can only kill once, then it's used up. The Godball thought if he were dispersed between the three of us..." Detbar looked up and the light glared off his lenses. "He would live on. Survive the attack."

"But the Assassin will still come," said Spanic, his voice quavering with emotion. "It'll kill one of us. It has to. That's its, uh, *raison d'être*."

"We're beginning to dream for the Godball," said Detbar. "He was right, apparently. He is living on."

Spanic appeared suddenly offended, and rushed out of the room. Yp followed, with a guilty and helpless look back at me and Detbar.

"It's something like a powerful hallucinogen," said Detbar. "You'll have to forgive us. We're not at our best. I – " He began weeping.

"Okay, okay," I said. "Apologies, sorry about the tongue. You're not going to mess with me any more, are you?"

Detbar shook his head sorrowfully. "No, no. You're wonderful, best thing that's happened... Christ... gotta get hold of myself."

"You're sorry you ate the Godball?" I asked, curious. According to Suit it was one of the last seven. And Detbar had devoted his career to studying it, protecting it from extinction.

"I don't know." He sighed, lifted his glasses and rubbed at his eyes. "It begged us to, you know. It was so frightened of the Assassin. I was happy to release it from that."

"So cheer up."

"Things haven't been good since then. We've been running in circles. Eddy... fell in love with Yp. And ever since we ate the Godball, our fear of the Assassin has been intense."

"Is Spanic right? Will it want to kill one of you?"

"I don't know. It's sort of a death message, a signal sent out to cancel the dreaming – it will have to fulfil its mission somehow. We – can you help us?"

"That's the idea, babe."

"But listen – " He looked up, suddenly lucid and desperate. "Our lives mean nothing, in the long run. Do you understand? What's essential is that the Godball survive, in some form, and keep dreaming... that's what's important."

"Big deal, huh?"

"Weren't you – didn't you go to school?"

"I was raised to inhabit my suit," I said. "In symbiosis."

He sighed. "The Godballs are dying out. The fewer there are, the less of an inhabiting force there is to support the great, dead universe."

"Right, right," I said. "That's why all this terrible ruination everywhere, natch. But where did the Assassins come from?"

On Thursday I had the happy thought that an uncompleted survey was really company business. No one would question my running down a file. It might be seen as a quirky sort of efficiency. I called in Linda Hamic and asked her to put together a Gabriel Thorn file. Linda's an efficient, if spooky, researcher. She truly loves the dark archives of company lore. She got a prominent notice in *Paperclip*, the company newspaper, while researching some Amazonian records. It seems that our original crew had met with a tribe of headhunters. Brazilian authorities had brought the primitive criminals to justice. They'd mailed the shrunken heads back to the company. The small box had waited sixty years for Linda to pull it out of a rusting file cabinet in a sub-basement. She keeps one of the heads at her workstation. Scares away people collecting for flowers.

I faxed a request to Houston for a satellite map of the area.

Then I read through my daily memos. Corporate headquarters have been worried about our image since the spills. The internal memos were vague and endless. Basically they wanted us to exude the odour of sanctity. Finally I got down to work – ordering core samples from the hinterlands of Belize.

On Friday morning the mail robot rolled by my desk. I picked up a giant fax of the park and the latest *Paperclip*: *It Holds Everything Together*. I managed to read the newspaper first. I needed to show some restraint. The lead article speculated on the Shining Path's ability to overthrow Peru. Politics is a low-level game for the company. If we wanted to, we would keep our wells in the Kingdom of the Sun. There was the usual dreck. Who's getting their five-year pin, their ten-year pin, their fifty-year pin. Some refinery worker's recipe for three-alarm chili. I tossed the newspaper into the trashcan and I unfolded the map.

It was easy to spot the spring. It was hard to deal with what I saw.

Around the spring – in broad curves – was a spiral. Not a product of glaciation, which never reached this far south. Not a fault pattern. Not weathering. Something had lain there. Something heavy and monstrous had lain there millennia ago. Its weight had depressed stone, reshaped the bedrock, cut across creek beds. I couldn't say if it was the sacred snake of myth. But something big and coiled.

I wondered how many places had had their dragons. Was the mystery of Castalia enacted at many sacred sites? Were there more sulphur springs guarded by dragons?

I could've requested data on sulphur springs worldwide. I contented myself with the original Castalia, mouth of the Styx. Most of the Grecian survey had been done by Mussolini's men during the Italian occupation. The Axis powers were thirsty for oil. I also asked for a satellite photo centred on Pytho and extending twelve kilometres beyond Mt. Parnassus.

Linda Hamic walked in with that gleam in her eye. She'd found something spooky – something that appealed to her taste for the macabre.

"I've put together a file on Gabriel Thorn. I got everything from the farrier's bill for shoeing his horse to the address of the insane asylum he died at," she said.

I wasn't going to snatch the bait just yet. "The farrier's bill?"

"You didn't survey Central Texas in an automobile in the 1920s. No roads into the back country and the roads between the cities were subject to flooding. So CenTex Petroleum gave their surveyors a horse maintenance account."

"Why do we keep the data?"

"Certain sections of central Asia might best be surveyed by a combination of jeeps, horses, satellites, and seismograph teams if we can negotiate the rights from the nations involved. We'll need baselines for budgeting for horse maintenance."

"OK. Now the juicy bits. The asylum? What was it? Syphilis?"

"Mr Thorn's last commissioned survey was TC1296-TC1369, private forest land later acquired by the State of Texas for Bluecher State Park. He rode out on the twenty-ninth of August and was expected back on the fourth of September. When he had not returned by the tenth, the President of CenTex Petroleum contacted the Texas Rangers. The Rangers plus a local sheriff's posse combed the area. Mr Thorn was found dancing by his slaughtered horse."

"Dancing?"

"With wild abandon. It took the sheriff and a couple of his boys to hold Thorn down. He seems to have lost the power of speech or at least he wouldn't answer their questions. Because of the violent nature of his movements he was taken to the State Asylum at Austin. He died six months later when an overzealous guard shot him during an escape attempt. The CenTex board decided not to have the area surveyed as there might be some hidden danger to putative work crews. I've included the minutes of their meeting in the file."

"Linda, you're amazing."

"Yes, sir. I am. I think this would make a good article for the *Paperclip*."

"Could – em, could you hold off on that article for a couple of months?"

"Well, there's no pressing need for it. Please tell me what you find. Good luck."

She smiled, handed me a manila folder full of documents, and left. If she can ever tear herself away from that haunted library of hers, she'll be running this company.

I glanced through the minutes. Samuel Mercer, president of CenTex, told how messy and muddy Thorn was. How in spite of the caked mud in his hair, his movements were beautiful. The sheriff and his men had been reluctant to capture him. "It just didn't seem right." Thorn – or at least Thorn's Bowie knife – had slit his horse's throat.

The photos of Castalia came in in the afternoon. There was the same dragon pattern. If the dragon was common to both sites – why not the Muses? The Nine dance by moonlight according to Silander. Maybe Thorn or the madwoman had seen the dance and been driven mad. But they didn't know what to expect, they hadn't steeled themselves for such terrible beauty.

This Sunday the Moon would be full. I had seen it three-quarters full last Sunday evening.